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ABSTRACT

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ED 471 093

The Efficacy of Using E-mail when Researching Inclusive Teaching Practices used by Male Academics

Refereed paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Fremantle (WA), December 1 - 6, 2001.

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes work-in-progress and reflects upon a small research project, 'A Small Study of Male Academics and Their Inclusive Teaching Strategies', in which the author trialed the use of e-mail communication as a medium for having repeated conversations with a number of male academics about their inclusive teaching practices. This forms a small part of a larger study concentrating on the non-mainstream leadership practices of male academics.

The study met with mixed results: on one hand, it provided an opportunity for the respondents to express how they teach inclusively; on the other, the study made it apparent that the use of e-mails alone did not facilitate communication with the respondents. The implication for research is to ensure that the communication is primarily of a personal, face-to-face nature with the use of e-mails providing a complementary, rather than a primary, means of data gathering.

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Introduction

Australian universities are increasingly transforming themselves into entrepreneurial agencies in order to equip themselves for increasing numbers and types of students, whilst maintaining an expectation that our universities will prepare graduates for highly specialised occupations and that the parallel expectation that more will be done for a lower cost (Clark 1998). One consequence of this is that 'most academics' lives have at least been "touched" by the forces of the market' (McCollow 1996 quoted in Ball 1999, p. 3). Demands are placed upon the time academics have and these demands - the effect of being 'touched' - are typically represented by concerns with quality assurance, performance management, productivity agreements, technological literacy and other accountability devices, despite recent literature on leadership, change and best management practice that acknowledges recognition and respect for cultural diversity and about the valuing of democratic relationships and caring environments (Ball 1999; Blackmore 1995; Blackmore & Sachs 2000; Kissane 2000).

The increase in the number and type of students attracted by our entrepreneurial universities place particular demands on the academics who teach in them. In addition to students from the mainstream, funding is provided to higher education institutions to improve the access and participation of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, economically and socially disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students from rural and isolated areas and women in postgraduate courses and non-traditional areas of study. Added to these groups of students, there are 'second chance' students, including those who are granted entry to postgraduate courses on the basis of their previous trade qualifications and work experience, overseas students studying in Australia and overseas students for whom Australian universities provide courses in their home countries. The diversity amongst the student population becomes increasingly broad (King, Hill & Hemmings 2000).

The cultural diversity of our university students, however, is not only limited to these groups, for it includes '...ethnic background, class, gender, socio-economic status, regional differences, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and age' (Kalantzis & Cope 2000). The challenge for academics is to embrace the ever-changing cultural diversity amongst students (and staff), along with the many different understandings and experiences of education and what is considered

to be valid knowledge and ways of knowing. In so doing, the intention is to ensure the inclusiveness of our teaching and of our curricula, such that:

> Inclusiveness necessitates treating the knowledge and experiences of people from all groups in society as valid and relevant. Teaching, learning and assessment cater for a variety of styles and values (Kalantzis & Cope 2000, p. 36).

This pursuit is problematical, however, because of the dilemma that is created by saying that all knowledge and behaviour should be validated, when clearly the actions of bigots, homophobes and racists, for instance, deny other (and particular) people their basic human rights.

My own perspective on inclusivity in teaching comes from my concern about the 'othering' that exists in our society and the need to reverse this if a recognition of diversity is to occur in our Australian universities. 'Othering' here is taken to mean the exclusionary practices levelled at an individual or any group that is considered different or outside of the majority population (Riggins 1997) on the basis of their characteristics (or presumed characteristics). My concerns for social justice arise because certain groups or individuals experience unfair treatment that damages them and society. Further, aiming for a socially just society is in keeping with Australia's international human rights obligations, namely, the *International covenant on civil and political rights* that asserts the rights of all peoples to include:

- Their own language, culture and religion;
- Participation in public affairs;
- Freedom of expression, movement, association and assembly;
- Liberty and security of person;
- Equal treatment under the law (Chambers & Pettman 1986, p. 26).

Academics are, notionally at least, well placed to work towards a socially just society and to ensure that individuals or groups are not 'othered' and rendered invisible or marginalised by the way they teach. At the teaching and learning level, academics are able to ensure that issues of gender, sexuality, language, culture, rurality, religiosity, disability and a broad range of diverse cultures are a visible part of their curricula, although experience suggests that this does not always happen.

My purpose in this paper then, in light of the current demands of the entrepreneurial university, is to reflect on the inclusive teaching practices that a small group of male academics report using. The study relates to a much larger project that concentrates on male academics and their inclusive leadership practices - and thus, the focus on a group of males in this particular study.

Whereas there is literature in which arguments for inclusive teaching practices are expressed (such as University of Western Australia 1999; Leach & Moss 1993; Dadzie 1993; Kalantzis & Cope 2000), I wanted to learn more about the teaching strategies that academics actually employ in the university courses that they teach. Compared with knowing **what** could or should be done to ensure inclusivity, I wanted to know **how** academics convey the messages to their students.

The means by which the data were gathered involved a trial of using e-mail communication, a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC). This paper discusses the efficacy of using e-mail communication for this type of study as well as considering what the male academics said about their inclusive teaching practices. Although the initial focus of the study was on pedagogical issues around inclusion, it has subsequently evolved into a critique of the efficacy of using e-mail communication to gather this information.

Making Contact

Approval to proceed with the study was obtained from the Deakin University Ethics Committee (DUEC). In addition to identified actions to protect the participants' identities, DUEC was also concerned about the potential for e-mail communication potentially being accessed by third parties. This concern was duly included in the Plain Language Statement circulated to each participant. The Plain Language Statement also indicated my own teaching areas at La Trobe University, as I felt that this was important for any free exchange of information. A password-protected Hotmail account for the dispatch and receipt of e-mails was subsequently established.

Having received the appropriate ethics clearance to proceed, the intention was to make - and sustain - e-mail contact with five male academics who were known to have a profile in social justice teaching or writing in an Australian university. Their profiles related to their publications or to their known teaching expertise. In short,

these would be men who were considered to be leaders in their fields[1].

The academics were invited to participate in up to three e-mail conversations. This type of interview has been referred to as a 'pseudo-interview' because they are conducted via e-mail, rather than face-to-face (Forgasz, Leder & Lynch 1996). I was hoping to see whether it was possible to move away from a one-off interview and instead, have conversations with these men using CMC, yet I was mindful of Oakley's (1981) criticisms about the artificiality of this stance, given that the interviewer is always manipulating the direction of the interview - and indeed, of the conversation.

The first e-mail conversation with each respondent was intended to invite the men to outline their main purpose/s in teaching inclusivity and to describe the teaching strategies they believed they used when working with groups - specifically, groups of mainstream students. The intention of the second e-mail was to respond and react to the first response but to go on to elicit comments from the men about how they respond in their teaching when the interests of individuals or people from social justice groups were being challenged. The final e-mail was intended to do two things: to clarify previous points made by the participants and to provide the participants with a summary of the method/s they have described and which they might wish to amend.

Once I had identified the academics drawn from different Australian universities who I would like to contact on the basis of their profiles, it was easy to obtain their work e-mail addresses. Three men were contacted via e-mail in early to mid-December, 2000, one of whom responded immediately; the other, almost a month later. The reason that I did not approach all five men at the same time was that I was concerned that I might not be able to keep track of five conversations simultaneously.

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[1] It is important to note that it is not possible to identify here the particular fields from which the sample was drawn. The Australian university sector is not so vast as to ensure total anonymity! In the interests of confidentiality and maintaining anonymity therefore, the generic descriptor 'social justice area' will be used as a shorthand that includes the following, sometimes overlapping, groups of people: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, gay men and lesbians, and people with disabilities. Unfortunately, this means that the areas in which the men work are rendered invisible by this representation.

The first person to respond, although interested in the study, felt unable to participate, as he was about to leave his university. He did offer to pass on my invitation to another person, and in hindsight, this may have been an appropriate course of action, although at the time I had concerns that the questions would be passed on to unknown others, thereby raising issues about how confidentiality could be maintained and participation in the project limited. I was mindful of the caution expressed by Forgasz et al. (1996, p. 203) about the use of CMC in research, and how, even in a closed distribution list, the questions could easily be forwarded beyond the men initially targeted. My attempt to encourage the original person to participate nevertheless was thwarted when my communication system was knocked out in a storm, but apart from an acknowledgment that my final e-mail had been received, nothing further was heard from him.

The second person to respond did so early in the New Year, citing pressures of work in the lead-up to Christmas that caused the delay. This person declined to proceed further, on the basis that he did not believe he taught 'around the concept of inclusion'. This provided an interesting insight, however, for I was aware of articles with social action themes that this man had written. It may have been the deliberate open-endedness of my use of the term 'inclusive' that had caused him to make this decision, but it might also have had something to do with the difference between the rhetoric of social action compared with its practice. (Interestingly, it is this perception of academics not practising what they preach, that was raised by one of the eventual participants.) The third person contacted prior to Christmas did not respond at all, nor did he respond to a second attempt in mid-January.

At this point, mid-January 2001, I needed to reconsider how to proceed, as the timeliness of making contact was clearly an issue. Choosing a time most suitable for academics was problematic, so I decided that I would act immediately, hoping that I might be able to engage several of the men before the academic year got under way. Similarly, I decided to try to maintain the sample size at five, so I generated the names of some other men who were also known to teach and/or publish in various areas of social justice. Early in February 2001, I made e-mail contact with four men new to the study. Although I have had no response from one of the men, conversations occurred with the other three.

In total, therefore, I initiated e-mail contact with seven men and had e-mail conversations with three of them. Throughout this paper I shall refer to them as Rob, Tom and Sam. The following sections of

the paper deal with an outline of the logistical aspects of the contact followed by some excerpts from the conversations that I had with the three men. This is then followed with a discussion about inclusive teaching practices in light of what the academics said and finally, some closing comments in relation to the efficacy of using e-mail correspondence for this, and future, research.

What Happened

Rob

Before agreeing to participate, Rob simply asked two questions: 'How do you define inclusivity and why only male academics?' Once I had explained to Rob that this research was a related component to a broader study that would examine male academics who were undertaking leadership differently to the mainstream and what I meant by the term 'inclusivity', he invited me to talk further, saying he was happy to answer my questions. The questions I asked Rob were principally aimed at trying to ascertain the general nature of his teaching responsibilities and the specific ways in which he approached the teaching of his particular social justice area. I also described a situation that sometimes arises in lectures and tutorials and invited Rob to say how he would respond to this situation. The situation I described was where a student/s might say something that is sexist or racist or homophobic and which may offend others in the class, yet in the interests of free speech and wanting to create an environment where students can feel comfortable to express and hear different points of view, there can be tension.

Two days later, Rob had responded, his subject line reading 'yr questions', which by the use of this shorthand, suggested that Rob had a familiarity with the medium being used. The first part of his message said, 'a quick response--for longer answers you should arrange a time to interview me'. Rob went on to indicate his mainstream area of teaching and to stress that he does, seemingly reluctantly, a little teaching in the social justice area, stating 'I am not very convinced of the need for such a ghettoisation of knowledge'. He reinforced this later in his e-mail, making it clear that he reached this conclusion on the basis of some overseas teaching he did in the social justice studies area in question. In relation to how he might deal with sexist/racist/homophobic comments, Rob revealed that he had encountered '...more trouble with overtly anti-Semitic comments in tuts'. Rob concluded with the following: 'I believe strongly in the

need to integrate discussion of [social justice area] and difference into undergrad teaching…' Rob also indicated that he did not draw his students' attention to the fact that he was a member of the social justice group under discussion, but remarked, 'if they do the reading they are assigned it would be pretty apparent'.

Mindful that Rob had prefaced his preceding e-mail with a stated preference for a face-to-face meeting, I attempted to acknowledge this and decided not to ask any more questions, although I was uncertain how I could subtly remind Rob that it was the intention of the research to use e-mail communication only. In hindsight, it would have been more appropriate to exercise some discretion and at least lift the phone and talk to Rob directly.

Instead, I decided to make some statements by way of response to some of the things that Rob had said, hoping that he might make a final comment about my responses. I decided to use this approach based on my own experiences of communicating with Aboriginal people: sometimes the asking of a direct question is inappropriate and deemed intrusive, whereas statement-making provides the listener with the opportunity to agree, disagree, clarify or expand upon certain ideas.

To this I promptly received a succinct e-mail from Rob that said, 'I am happy to have a follow-up interview but not to engage in a protracted discussion by e-mail.' This did not surprise me, as Rob had made it clear in the preceding e-mail that he would prefer a face-to-face interview where he could expand on things. Upon reflection, his style of writing - a preference for non-capitalisation and the use of abbreviated words - also suggested that a more matter-of-fact approach might have been more appropriate than the conversational approach that I opted for. Clearly, according to the ethics consent form, Rob was entitled to terminate his participation at any stage so I thought it prudent not to ask any further questions and e-mailed Rob to acknowledge receipt of his message and to thank him for his participation.

Sam

Unlike Rob, Sam was someone who was known to me and in the past, we had had reasons to communicate via e-mail, which were usually enjoyable experiences as they were frequently humorous, literary pieces. In his initial response to the questions that I had asked

of him, Sam indicated that he would think about them and then provide a written response when things quietened down a little. Sam also made the following suggestion:

> Have you thought of having your respondents get together to compare experiences later in the research process? It can be a wonderful experience for all concerned, with lots of interesting material for you that normally doesn't come out of dialogues between researcher and researched.

Sam's response was much more conversational, but whilst he was appreciative of being asked, he doubted whether he was suitable, citing his '…lack of experience in teaching in some areas of inclusivity. For example. Is the implied focus on gender and sexuality issues or on ethnicity, culture, language etc? I'm not much help on teaching the gender and sexuality issues.'

My first e-mail contact with Sam was towards the end of January, after which Sam e-mailed me on a few occasions apologising for not getting back to me. By the end of March, I was beginning to become anxious that the formality of the questions asked, as well as asking for written responses, might have been overly threatening for Sam, so I put my concerns to him. A few days later, Sam responded, saying he was 'very happy' to use e-mails, adding 'In fact, I would prefer this way because writing will provide me the opportunity to get some order into my responses.' It was, Sam made clear, a matter of finding the time: 'So just keep prodding me to do it!' was his instruction. Further prodding was not necessary, as in mid-April Sam provided a lengthy response to my questions - seven pages of it! 'In fact,' he said, 'I have to say that this is the first occasion I have taken time out to think about these things. Dreadful isn't it!!!'

Tom

I sent my first e-mail to Tom in mid-February and a few days later Tom responded, saying he was interested in 'talking some more'. I communicated again with Tom, but heard nothing, so in mid-March I e-mailed him again, letting him know that I was still prepared to listen if he was prepared to continue. Tom responded, and from his response it was clear that I would have no option but to communicate with him by phone before I could proceed any further.

I rang Tom to discuss the research, and as it transpired, he wanted to know something about me before he was prepared to go further. As I noted at the time: 'Tom is not comfortable about doing this sort of

interview without knowing any background about me or where I'm coming from. He gets many requests because of his expertise [in his field], so routinely checks out the background information of inquirers.' Tom, I sensed, was also reluctant about committing his comments to print, but he left the decision about whether and how to proceed up to me. After a few days thinking about it, I e-mailed Tom and asked if he would mind making some written comments about a topic he raised in our telephone discussion - the existence of exclusionary practices within social justice groups.

This contact was towards the end of March and when I had not received any e-mail from Tom by the end of April, I had decided that I would ask very gently one last time. Co-incidentally, however, we found ourselves at a meeting together and had a brief chat about my research. Tom apologised for taking so long to respond yet made it clear that he still was not comfortable communicating via e-mails. I did not want to push the matter further, so suggested that he should feel free not to continue, and nothing further has been heard from Tom at the time of writing.

Discussion

Teaching Interactions

Part of Rob's teaching involves seminars and tutorials that utilise discussions around appropriate videos and readings. In Sam's e-mails, he outlined some specific strategies he uses for ascertaining students' needs and interests, cautioning that his responses in the classroom are determined by the context and his intuition:

> I try to start with students describing their interests, needs and motivations. I provide material to draw out opinions and experiences. Then we follow various routes to clarification of knowledge, assumptions, values and interpersonal communication skills. I try to mirror and model in my teaching the processes of cultural learning. I am very oriented to process. Hard to fit what I do into measurable outcomes.

Sam's main model for handling diverse perspectives is to encourage students to distinguish between description, evaluation and feeling and develops with students some basic operating rules in class that incorporate the options of 'imposition, compromise and timeshare'.

Influences that Led to Teaching in Social Justice Areas

Sam was the only person to provide a specific response to questions that sought to explore how the academics found themselves teaching in or about social justice areas. In so doing, Sam traced some of his experiences as a child growing up in the country and these included the modelling demonstrated by his mother, 'a collector of stray people and causes', and his own subsequent dealings with friends from other countries. At secondary school, he was 'seduced by the infinite variety of European culture' that he was able to access through literature, languages and history.

Sam considers that although this looks like 'an inevitable progression towards scholarship and practice', it was not really like that. 'My engagement with diversity came from a struggle for self-knowledge rather than through books or academic role models'. It seems that Sam became engaged in his social justice area despite his initial academic course of study, or perhaps even as a reaction to it:

> In fact, I came to despise academics during my university study. They inverted my world. I had been brought up to believe in what a man did, not what he said he would do. I had been schooled in the world of practicality. If the water tank leaked, you fixed it or ran out of water. If a sheep got flyblown you cleaned it up or shot it. If you criticised your mates you were a bludging bastard etc. There were dreadful shortcomings in this culture of my parents and peers -- homophobia, sexism and an intolerance of all things emotional. But the culture of the academics was, it seemed to me, also lacking. Professors and lecturers sneered at each other and at the students, ridiculing us for our ignorance and callowness. They upended the values of my world without providing a viable alternative. To them what you said was more important than what you did. In fact they didn't do anything that seemed worthy to me. And apparently couldn't. They made a virtue of not knowing how to repair a puncture or replace a broken light bulb. They complained about rain and held us up to ridicule for playing football. They questioned our right to be at University if we couldn't imitate their accent or lived in the wrong suburbs.

As a result of this, Sam determined to seek a 'more practical application of knowledge', concluding that his involvement in diversity education:

> ... came from imaginative involvement in the exotic, parental role modelling for assisting the culturally different to adapt, a secular humanistic vision of what good citizenship in a plural democracy involves at the personal level, a personal antipathy to intellectual elitism and neglect of real life issues, and a dislike of social inequality. My role is more of an interpreter than a leader.

Nature of Teaching: Social Justice Areas and/or Mainstream

All three men indicated the breadth of their teaching workloads, which involved teaching at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Rob does only a small amount of teaching in his social justice area, saying:

> I do very little teaching in [the social justice area] nor would I want to - I am not very convinced of the need for such ghettoisation of knowledge…I believe strongly in the need to integrate discussion of [social justice area] and difference into undergrad teaching, and my experience of [the social justice area] in the US has left me unconvinced it's particularly useful.

Similarly, Tom's work entails working with people from a social justice group, but in a mainstream program, which suggests that a critical mass of people from the social justice group has been developed to warrant such a program. In the phone discussion with Tom, he described how this approach requires the use of appropriate pedagogy and organisational arrangements and stressed that 'inclusivity remains problematic even teaching students [from the social justice area]'.

For Sam, he laments the demise of specific teaching sessions in his social justice area, describing part of his current role as providing 'fillers' in some courses. As well as responding to students' interests, Sam actively introduces diversity issues in many of the courses he teaches. In two postgraduate subjects, however, he is specifically able to explore issues of cultural diversity:

> These tend to focus on diversity issues relating to ethnicity, language, nationality, religion and gender, but occasionally will focus on equality and human rights issues involved in organisational discrimination around diversity (expressed in racism, homophobia, disregard of disabled people's needs, and class conflict). Global issues relating to poverty, war, colonialism and development often emerge as foci if classes are keen on them.

Trouble-shooting

But teaching about 'the other' does not always proceed smoothly and situations arise in which students (and staff) might be offended by racist, homophobic, sexist or generally insensitive statements,

something that could be considered trouble-shooting, or which Sam described as 'dealing with sticky situations'. Whereas Rob revealed that he had 'had more trouble with overtly anti-Semitic comments in tuts', he did not provide any comments about how he dealt with them. Sam, however, was more expansive, saying:

> I generally allow the students to progress through various stages of learning about diversity and develop their own perspectives. I hurry some along if they are making life difficult for the others. I use a lot of peer teaching, small groups and personal interactions to provide an experiential base. Attitudinal change preceding behavioural change seems to be the usual route in the classroom learning I am involved with. But limited behavioural change is also possible in the classes and I use it deliberately, especially with the Asian students, always trying to provide a lot of support based on developing a supportive environment beforehand...In university teaching the expression of prejudice is usually implicit and indirect, therefore easier to manage in a teaching situation and much harder to get at and out into the open. In schools it is usually more brutal. But in my experience a similar range of strategies is open to teachers at all levels. I use a combination of affective and instrumental strategies. Of the affective I prefer guilt rather than shame - it lasts longer. Of the instrumental I prefer co-operation to achieve superordinate goals. Satisfies my preference for pluralistic democracy.

Discussion of Responses

A Reflection on the Literature

In some Australian universities, issues pertaining to social justice groups appear as Women's Studies, Disability Studies, Gay/Queer Studies, Aboriginal Studies and so on, although this is not always the case, for some universities opt for a mainstream, or core curriculum, approach. A limitation of a core curriculum approach is that the diversity of minority groups remains invisible (Ogbu 1992), although it is one way in which performance expectations and standards are not compromised for the sake of minority students (McDaniel & Flowers 2000). When it comes to curricula that specifically focus on studies of social justice groups, it can have the effect of helping students, including students from minority groups, to develop insights into cultural differences and to reduce prejudice and stereotyping (Williams & Green 1994; Ogbu 1992). Conversely, this can have the effect of treating minority students or students from social justice groups as 'other' (Riggins 1997; Zhang 1997; Frith

1998), or as Rob commented, lead to the 'ghettoisation of knowledge'.

Teacher-writers who are members of minority groups (such as Newell 1999; Callie 1994) describe the difficulties associated with the frequently formidable task associated with challenging the dominant beliefs and value systems in our societies. Appropriately, it should not only be group members involved in this, and this small project would indicate that this is the case - at least at the level of rhetoric, if not practice. This task of ensuring inclusion in the process of teaching and learning, along with the broader recognition of differences amongst students, is increasingly being embraced by our universities in Australia (for instance Deakin University, 2001; University of South Australia, 2001). The male academics in this particular study are cognisant of the sensitivities involved and would appear to have been long-time advocates of such movements. Different approaches to increase inclusive teaching practices are used and the discussion here is far from exhaustive. One such approach at an unidentified Australian university was to introduce final year non-Indigenous teacher education students to a subject known as Aboriginal Studies, the purpose of which was to develop attitudes to effect a change in the education of Aboriginal children (Reynolds 1999). This, reports Reynolds, would be achieved through 'the description and analysis of culture and cultural change as well as teaching for social justice, teaching for reconciliation and teaching for truth' (p. 18). This sociological or discipline-focussed approach differs from the checklist approach adopted by some authors (for example Dadzie 1993; Leach & Moss 1993) and which could have the effect of limiting inclusive teaching practices to a competency-based approach. Whilst checklist questions of the type generated by Leach and Moss are well-intentioned, they do not necessarily engender the commitment to inclusive teaching practices or a deeper understanding of what exclusion can mean; rather they are concerned with the superficialities, as can be seen in the following examples:

> Are teaching and reference materials free from stereotypical images, language and bias?
> Does the style of teaching and methods used encourage participation, self-awareness and confidence-building?
> Are staff confident about handling difficult situations in the classroom, especially involving incidents of sexism or racism or those involving students with disabilities? (Leach & Moss 1993, p. 32).

Awareness may be heightened, but not necessarily understanding - something that is typified in the following quotation:

> 'White people do not see themselves as white' (Katz 1982: 13). Because whites are not being discriminated against

> because they are white, they are inclined not to notice it, and therefore to ignore the role that white plays in their personal and social identity, in their everyday lives, in their access to social goods... But white is part of what whites are, and it has real consequences for them (Chambers & Pettman 1986, p. 24).

Discussion of Methodology

Reflection on what the literature says

When Forgasz et al. (1996) considered the use of CMC in mathematics education, they acknowledged the potential of the Internet and of e-mails in educational research, but not without some cautions. They noted that the ease and speed of communicating via e-mail could mean that it is possible to follow-up any incomplete responses (to questionnaires) immediately and the openness afforded by e-mails compared with hard copy questionnaires, meant that respondents provided substantial amounts of information. A further advantage that they noted is that the data does not require transcription (Forgasz et al. 1996, p. 206). It had been considered for a relatively long time that e-mail dialogue is a social construction as well as a political process, as argued by Evans and Newell (1993, p. 92):

> CMC does not, of itself, *make* [original emphasis] dialogue or independent learning and researching. It is the people who use CMC and construct its forms of educational technology that do so.

Much more recently, this argument has been re-iterated in a comprehensive review of the literature conducted by Tsui (2001), and although her writings are in the context of computer mediated communication involving a discussion site rather than the use of e-mails, her observation is that there is a 'complex interplay of the socio-cultural and psychological factors which mediate interactions'. The argument advanced by some CMC participants that lack of time prevents participation, may mask other factors such as technical concerns about using the medium, the attitude toward the use of computers for such tasks, accessibility of hardware and software, the characteristics of the group of users and the relationship/s between its members, the purpose of the exchanges and the ownership of the tasks (Tolmie & Boyle 2000; van Braak 2001). Indeed, the extent to which there is a shared purpose in the CMC activity appears to

influence an individual's continued participation in the activity (Tolmie & Boyle 2000).

Tellingly, participants in on-line groups were much less apprehensive about who was reading their messages once they had enough confidence to post messages in which they felt they had something to offer and that they considered others wanted to read (Selinger 1998, p. 26). In an earlier study, Wells (1992, p. 13) deduced that initial on-line participation could be influenced by a reluctance to contribute 'because of a fear of appearing unintelligent or exposing vulnerabilities', plus concerns associated with the maintenance of a transcript of the exchange/s. Effectively too, the text a person writes becomes their signature whereby the existence of typographical and other errors - the appearance of their text - is perceived as 'a detraction from one's image' (Harasim 1990, p. 50). Teachers, Tsui (2001) observes, are keen to present themselves as competent professionals. The absence of social and visual face-to-face contact in CMC, despite conflicting arguments about the value of such interaction, has lead 'more and more researchers...to believe that CMC should be complemented or supplemented by FFC [face-to-face contact] (Tsui 2001). Either face-to-face or telephone contact with Rob (in this current study) would probably have allowed for a more accurate reading of his meanings rather than a reliance on written e-mail messages in which it was difficult to guess at his tolerance for an on-going conversation.

On the basis of Tsui's (2001) expansive review of the literature in relation to teaching using CMC, it is possible to advance some thoughts about why the use of e-mail communication in this current study was not particularly successful. The absence of initial face-to-face contact, with its inherent valuable relationship and rapport building, meant that the participants did not have enough contextualising cues, but they were also taking large personal and professional risks by committing their 'signatures' to print and to an unknown audience. (Even though the participants would have been conversing with me, there may have been a sense of uncertainty about how far I could be trusted in terms of keeping their comments - and their professional integrity - to myself.) Tom's response to the prospect of conducting e-mail conversations, in particular, is an example of this reluctance, whereas by way of contrast, Sam's voluminous response may have been a reflection of our pre-existing relationship.

Further to these considerations, and with the value of hindsight, the use of a Hotmail account may have diminished the perceived

importance or status of the messages, thus reducing the responses. I would have been wiser to have used my Deakin University e-mail account.

Additional personal reflections

In addition to the limiting factors identified in the literature, other influences raised in discussions with colleagues might also be considered. The first of these deals with the demands that academics face, a point previously made in the introduction to this paper. Put simply, for academics who are regularly confronted with a massive daily list of e-mails that require attention, a request for more of their time may not be their highest priority, and for some, might even be regarded as harassment. A second influence - and one that, in hindsight, was not explored enough in the ethics approval process - relates to the sensitive nature of this research project. Participants were not merely being asked to discuss inclusive teaching practices, but were being asked - perhaps even confronted - to disclose specific instances of their teaching practice. Indeed, this line of inquiry was asking the men to put themselves professionally 'on the line' - obviously a very different task to completing a questionnaire or providing a response to a print media extracts (for example, Forgasz et al. 1996). The fact that this was to a largely unknown person could have made the request that much more daunting.

Conclusion

For me, this exercise has been an incredibly valuable one. On one hand, I did learn things about other male academics' inclusive teaching practices, and when considered alongside a review of the literature, have had affirmed the importance of ensuring inclusiveness and social justice in my teaching. For instance, the approach taken by Reynolds (1999), in which various sociological perspectives (such as functionalist and conflict perspectives on schooling and issues of culture and identity formation and schooling) are reportedly used to increase student-teachers' understandings of what is occurring for Aboriginal students, their families and communities, has been valuable. Added to this, the contribution of the available literature, particularly that written by people from social justice groups (such as McDaniel & Flowers 2000; Callie 1994; Newell 1999), as well as the materials of other writers (including

Chambers & Pettman 1986; Ogbu 1992; Williams & Green 1994) provide me with rationales for action. These, in turn, will enable me to develop better-informed and insightful experiences upon which to develop my own inclusive teaching practices. The contribution that the male academics in this study have made for my own practice revolve around issues of confidence-building. The men in this study, well known for their stances on social justice issues, themselves grapple with, and have doubts about, their inclusive teaching practices. That this is the case is not only reassuring, but also telling, in that there is potentially much to be learnt from each other.

On the other hand, I believe I learnt much more about the use of computer mediated communication. Whereas it appeared as a seductive opportunity for someone like myself who is located in a rural area to conduct research, it proved to be far from efficacious. The time taken to gather a relatively small amount of data made it a questionable research technique, but more importantly, the complexities it poses in terms of risk-taking and personal-professional face-saving creates too many dilemmas and raises ethical issues. Accordingly, it would have been satisfying to test these thoughts with the participants, but because of the reasons outlined, it would have been a useless exercise. I could hardly expect the male academics to expose more of their personal selves by putting a response in writing in an e-mail to this line of inquiry!

Although I have no difficulty with the idea of having on-going conversations with participants, there are particular concerns that I have for relying on e-mail communication for this type of research project I have just described, amongst them the following:

First, the power relations involved in asking participants to respond to an unknown and unassessable researcher raises serious issues of not only power and control, but also of ethics. Further, it raises methodological issues about participation in studies and caution when responding. Whereas face-to-face contact exposes the researcher, while still giving the researcher 'the upper hand', it does enable the participant to assess trustworthiness, to probe on their part, and to make informed decisions therefore on how much to disclose - if anything.

Second, because professional reputations can be perceived to be at stake, the respondent may decide to not participate or to mask difficulties they might be experiencing with things such as the technology, the software or giving responses to questions by providing excuses such as not having the time. Ethically, it is

inappropriate to put the respondent in a position in which they might be experiencing personal distress, particularly since the medium of e-mails does not easily, if at all, allow for probing questions that would otherwise enable the researcher to be aware of this and to then do something about it[2].

Third, a reliance on the surface meanings of written e-mail messages at the expense of the nuances and deeper meanings intended or alluded to by the writer, can have the effect of stultifying the communication process between the sender and the receiver. Devoid of instantaneous feedback and important paralinguistic cues such as head nodding and hand gestures, the exchanges are linear and almost clinical, which is far from good interpersonal communication.

Fourth, the participant is entitled to expect that the information he or she is giving is going to be gathered in the manner that is easiest for them. This necessarily means flexibility needing to be built into the design of the data gathering phase of the research and recognises the respect that researchers need to exercise and that their role as researcher is not the paramount issue.

In summary, to the extent that this small research project informs the larger research task of the Doctor of Education program, I am pleased that I initiated and persevered with the study, albeit having to modify my data gathering approach mid-stream. I have had solidly reinforced my understanding and appreciation of the value of the interpersonal relationships that are built up by face-to-face interactions. After I have met with the participants face-to-face and they have had an opportunity to assess me, computer mediated communication will have a valuable role as a supplementary data gathering tactic

[2] Although untested, there may also be links here with expectations of masculinity such as not wanting to admit to difficulties, perseverance in the face of difficulty and an unwillingness to ask for and accept help from others. Perhaps some evidence for this might become apparent in the larger research project that will consider male academics as leaders and how they cope with doing leadership - and masculinity - differently.

As the primary means of data gathering for research that involves the asking of personal and professionally sensitive information, however, I conclude from this study that it is not appropriate. Said Mason and Kaye (1990, 20 quoted in Tsui 2001):

> CMC should probably not be seen as a substitute for such face-to-face events, but rather as a means of continuing to serve a number of the above functions (i.e. tutorial discussion, seminars, counseling, socializing, etc.) conveniently and effectively in between occasional meetings. A group of learners who have already met each other in person, in the presence of a tutor/animateur, are more likely to be able to communicate effectively on-line because the personal meeting has provided a number of contextualizing cues that would otherwise be absent from discussions held exclusively within the framework of a computer conference.

The same, I believe, could also be said for the conduct of educational research that has the potential to delve into certain aspects of the personal-professional actions of educational practitioners.

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